

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

She Was Only the Stable Master's Daughter

She was only the Stable Master's daughter, but:

- (a) all of the horsemen knew her.
- (b) she was looking for a more stable relationship.
- (c) she would one day marry the Tsar of Russia.

If one were well versed in Vaudeville comedy routines, the correct answer would be (a). But if one were a true student of history, the correct answer would be (c). And the Stable Master's daughter's son would visit the United States on a grand tour, shoot buffalo, be a guest of honor at the first Rex parade in New Orleans at Mardi Gras, and have this lyric sung about him:

*May the Grand Duke Alexis
Ride a buffalo in Texas,
If ever I cease to love.*



The Grand Duke Alexis (right) poses with George Armstrong Custer at the start of a specially organized buffalo hunt. William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody served as scout.

This scintillating tale all begins back in the Grand Duchy of Hesse and by Rhine, which was formed in 1806 due to the actions of Napoleon Bonaparte after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. Napoleon elevated the area once ruled by the Landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt to the level of a grand duchy. Today this former state is part of modern-day Germany.

Ludwig II, Grand Duke of Hesse and by Rhine (1777-1848) was married to Wilhelmina of Baden (1788-1836), but the youngest of Wilhelmina's seven children were fathered by Baron August von Senarclens de Grancy. He served as Grand Master of Stables, Major General and Knight of Honor and Devotion in the Order of Malta. It appears he was also devoted to the Grand Duchess.

His paternity of the later children of Wilhelmina of Baden was well known among diplomatic circles, and correspondence exists that detailed this fact to reigning sovereigns, such as Queen Victoria and the Russian Tsar. Wilhelmina's lover fathered children that were recognized as Ludwig's legal heirs (and with his consent). Two of these children, Alexander (1823-1888) and Marie of Hesse (1824-1880) are the ancestors of the last Tsars of Russia, as well as the Mountbatten family.

In 1838, the Tsarevich Alexander Nikolayevich fell in love with the 14-

year-old Marie of Hesse. He married her on April 16, 1841, well aware that she was indeed the Stable Master's daughter. His mother the Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna voiced her objections, but Alexander prevailed. Marie would become the Empress Consort of Alexander II of Russia and mother and grandmother of future tsars, including the ill-fated Nicholas II. In 1850, Marie became the mother of Alexei Alexandrovich Romanov, better known as the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia (hosted royally by the people of New Orleans in 1872).

Marie's brother, Alexander, was also involved in a shocking affair. Against the Tsar's wishes, Alexander eloped with Julia von Hauke, a lady-in-waiting to his sister. They returned to Hesse where Grand Duke Ludwig III (Alexander's half-brother) was unhappy with Julia's dynastic status. She was created Countess of Battenberg (named after a village in the north of Hesse). Despite the family's scandalous origin, it was in no time accepted into European nobility. The Battenbergs would later change their name to Mountbatten and are the ancestors of England's Prince Charles and his two sons, William and Harry. The future heirs to the throne of England (as well as the current Spanish throne) are therefore descended from the Stable Master's son.



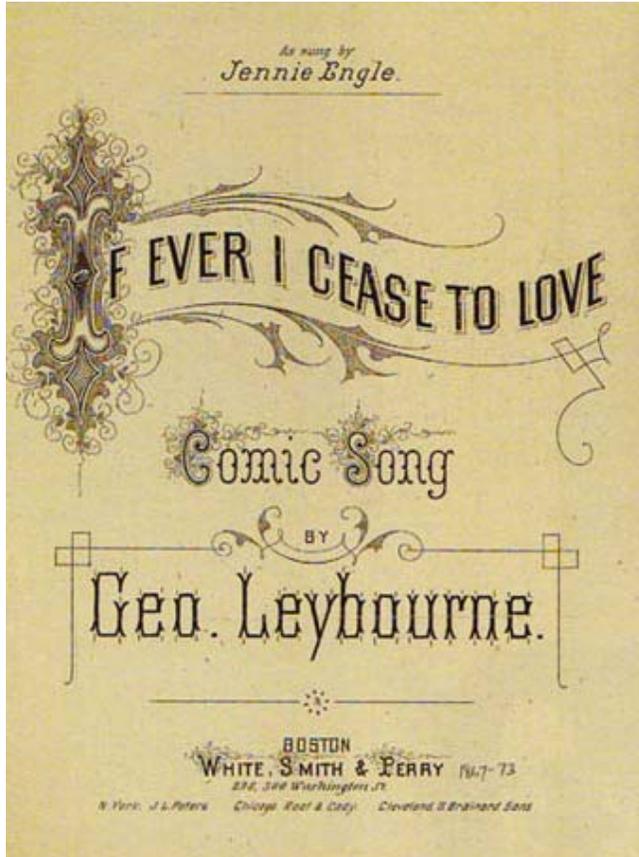
A more formally attired Grand Duke Alexis

The Grand Duke never rode a buffalo in Texas, but then Nebraska doesn't rhyme with Alexis. And that's where the young duke did make a spectacular buffalo hunt on his historic grand tour of the United States. The big hunt took place on the Grand Duke's 22nd birthday (January 14, 1872) accompanied by Generals George Armstrong Custer and Phil Sheridan, Buffalo Bill Cody and Chief Spotted Tail of the Brulé tribe (who brought 100 of his best warriors to the event).

Today this celebration continues with the "Grand Duke Alexis Rendezvous" held at the actual site of this hunt in Southwest Nebraska, just northeast of Hayes Center. The last such event was held September 29 through October 1, 2006. This hunt was also the subject of a 1959 episode of "Death Valley Days". Remember "20 Mule Team Borax" and "The Old Ranger" narrating before Ronald

Reagan got the job?

In New Orleans, the bands played for Alexis the Russian national anthem. But when Lewis J. Salomon, the first Rex, dismounted on Canal Street the bands played "If Ever I Cease To Love". This official anthem of Rex was part of British singer Lydia Thompson's repertoire. She was appearing in town at the Academy of Music.



"If Ever I Cease To Love"

Legend has Alexis, Lydia and the tune forever romantically linked, but it was the diminutive actress Lotta Crabtree the tall duke went to see while in New Orleans. It was on Valentine's Day at the St. Charles Theatre, exactly one month after his buffalo hunt. Not understanding a single word she spoke in "The Little Detective", Alexis was still captivated by Miss Crabtree. So much so that he sent her a bracelet of diamonds, opals and pearls in Memphis, her next stop after New Orleans. It was a brief encounter but hardly a stable relationship.

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